

## Controlling Fatigue Levels

**Working to prescriptive hours may seem reasonable on paper, but it fails to cater for individual differences**

Recently I had the opportunity to attend an excellent conference in Fremantle titled 'Coping With The 24 Hour Society'. This conference brought together professors, doctors, researchers and operators in road, rail, air and sea.

Firstly, I must say that the conference was well-constructed; offering delegates an insight into what causes fatigue and what we can do about it.

While it was a good conference, I do, however, think more drivers needed to be involved to offer a real-life non-research based perspective.

I am very pleased to report that, finally – even very early in the picture – the research bodies came to some mutual understanding in relation to the question of 'Do Prescriptive Hours of Service Work?'

### One in five drivers can go into a trance-like state and actually sleep with their eyes open

The answer, of course, was 'no' – prescriptive hours of service do not account for individual differences in people. Furthermore, it takes no account of time of day effects, prior shift load and pattern of work. Of course, this issue will be continually battled between the jurisdictions.

All eyes were wide open in relation to Australian fatigue management initiatives. Foreigners seemed extremely interested in our approaches to the problem; particularly the BHP Transport and Logistics Management Model (see Truck Australia May 2000) and Western Australia's 'Code of Conduct'. Australians, it seems, are leaders in these areas of fatigue management.

Sleep apnoea played a very big part in the conference. We heard from specialists in the field about the effects of sleep apnoea, the legal implications and the effective

devices available to treat the problem. Just because a person has been diagnosed with sleep apnoea does not mean that he/she can no longer work. It simply means they can seek help to control the condition.

Short naps of 15 minutes were seen to offer temporary benefit from fatigue. However, overwhelming research evidence suggests that – working between the hours of midnight to 6.00am (working when your natural body state says you should be sleeping) – still remains a risk area. When the effect of working continuous consecutive nights is combined with little sleep, the risk of sleep deprivation increases. This, in turn, can lead to falling asleep behind the wheel ...

Prescriptive hours of service do not

work – the verdict is out. But some people believe there has to be some type of control; whether it be in the form of Occupational Health & Safety approaches, code of practice or fatigue management programs.

It seemed very clear that, unless transport companies identify the risk of long working hours (risk assessment) and put measures in place, they may be left behind in the race towards better management and staff relations.

There are currently many devices being trialed. However, it was noted that technology still has an extremely long way to go before it can offer real benefits. Devices being trialed, such as rolling and blinking of the eyes, work sometimes. But, as we heard by one presenter (according to the research conducted), one in five drivers can go into a 'trance-like state' and actually sleep with their eyes open.

In some respects it was stated that in-vehicle devices may actually encourage drivers to continue instead of stopping. Devices will never be 100 per cent correct – the individual is the only person who can truly recognise and control his or her own fatigue levels. Human beings are made with the most accurate devices of all – recognising the signals that your body is telling you when 'enough is enough'.

One way in which technology assisted greatly was in relation to extended waiting times during loading or unloading. A system was profiled where drivers are given a large number and electronic beeper on arrival, which is displayed in his/her cab window.

If they are unable to access the dock straight away, the truck can be parked on the complex. When it's time to load/unload, he/she is buzzed. What a simple system! It makes you wonder why our drivers have to fight for a position in a queue and wait so long.

Oh, that's probably because when these superstores were designed they did not think sufficient parking for drivers and fatigue management was a priority. Makes you wonder?

Web surfers are treated this month to the following sites:

**www.saferoad.net** – The Safety Education Display Trailer;

**www.healthyeating.org** – Eat well, live well – good information for drivers and staff. Happy surfing.

Finally how did you go with your risk assessment? (See Truck Australia May 2000.)

Until next month, stay safe.

Darren Nolan is the Quality Manager of Nolan's Interstate Transport  
 Email: [quality@nolantransport.com.au](mailto:quality@nolantransport.com.au)  
 Web: [www.nolantransport.com.au](http://www.nolantransport.com.au)